

EMPLOYMENT AND THE OLDER WORKER



Workers of the Future

Who will be the workers of the future? Many will be older baby boomers. With increasing numbers of older adults staying in the work force, the trend toward early retirement is beginning to reverse itself. Many older adults believe that the higher levels of education they possess will allow them to continue making unique contributions to society. Other older adults will continue to work because of economic necessity. Many older workers are among the 17% of older Americans who have incomes of less than 125% of poverty.

The 1999 U.S. Department of Labor study, "Futurework: Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century," reported "the new millennium promises opportunities" and "creates risk." Employers and employees now face challenges in the way work affects their lives and livelihood.

A 1997 Radcliffe Public Policy Institute study projects that the number of workers age 45 plus will reach 17 million between 1994 and 2005. The study, which focuses on training older workers, noted that as we move into the next century, "neither employers nor employees can afford to sit by as the skills of the workforce become obsolete."

Evolving Employee Skills and Abilities

Aided by the observations of researchers and policy makers, and by contemporary experiences, employers are becoming more aware of the value of mature workers. Old myths and stereotypes are fading. Today, the knowledge and skills most in demand are those necessary for positions in high technology and the service industries. Because of the changes wrought by technology, there is a diminishing supply of jobs that require sheer physical strength, which is more often a requisite for jobs in manufacturing and the heavy industries.

Recent studies show that intelligence and productivity do not necessarily diminish as people age. The ability to learn remains constant throughout most of the life span. Like any other part of the body, however, the brain functions optimally if it is continually stimulated through use.

The future world of work is being shaped both by our demographics and by emergent technologies. The criteria for participating in the 21st century workforce is evolving. Today, many new skills are required by jobs in the growth industries. Among other factors, the actual acquisition of new skills will determine individual roles in the workforce.



ADMINISTRATION ON AGING

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services / Administration on Aging / 200 Independence Avenue, SW / Washington, DC 20201

The repetitive functions of traditional manufacturing jobs are becoming obsolete. Today's just-in-time production demands just-in-time workers, i.e. skilled, contingency, part time or temporary workers who can be hired on a moment's notice to fill a moment's need.

Evolving Work Environment

Many older workers wish to continue working, have the flexibility to respond to time constraints and, the desire to learn new skills. Workers are increasingly taking advantage of alternative work arrangements such as flexi-time, flexi-place, and telecommuting. Today, employers are responding with teleconferencing, voice-activated data retrieval, ergonomic keyboards and mobile telephones.

The Department of Labor's National Industry-Occupation Employment Matrix projects a 14.4% increase in the number of jobs for all industries between 1998 and 2008. An AARP study reports that one-in-eight baby boomers expect to work, at least part time, during traditional retirement years, with 17% of the group surveyed envisioning starting their own business.

With today's evolving work environment and the more receptive attitudes of employers, we can anticipate more older workers remaining in, or reentering, the workforce. Today, the economy is more responsive to the needs of part time and temporary workers with skills in technology. Given this new and evolving environment, older workers can secure their place in the workforce of the 21st century with relative ease.

Resources

U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration
Division of Older Worker Programs
Telephone: 202-219-5904 Website: <http://doleta.gov>

America's Job Bank - Web site: <http://www.ajb.dni.us/>

U.S. Small Business Administration
Telephone: 1-800-U-ASK-SBA Web site: <http://www.sba.gov>

Working in close partnership with its sister agencies in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the AoA provides leadership, technical assistance, and support to the national aging network of 57 State Units on Aging, 655 Area Agencies on Aging, 225 Tribal and Native organizations representing 300 American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal organizations, and two organizations serving Native Hawaiians, plus thousands of service providers, adult care centers, caregivers, and volunteers. For more information about the AoA, please contact:

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